

04/27/21 Tuesday

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Forthcoming French Atlantic Ocean Missile Test Suspected as Hypersonic Weapon Debut - Report
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

So far, only Russia and China have developed working hypersonic weapons, which are nearly impossible to detect and intercept due to their extreme speed and maneuverability. However, several nations have programs to build their own, including the United States and France. After some unusual marine warnings were posted ahead of a French missile test, some experts are speculating it could signal an upcoming launch of France's hypersonic missile, which was expected to make its debut sometime this year.

Dutch researcher Marco Langbroek posted on Twitter on Sunday about several recent navigational warnings across the North Atlantic for the coming weeks that, when plotted out, didn't resemble what he expected.

"Navigational Warnings suggest that France will be test-firing an #ICBM from DGA Essais de Missiles near Biscarosse towards Bermuda between Apr 28-May 21," he tweeted, noting that "Target area does not fit a simple ballistic trajectory."

"The dogleg shown is purely hypothetical and not very realistic, to be clear. Just to show the deviation from a simple ballistic trajectory," he added.

While three of the four zones outlined in the warning do follow a ballistic trajectory, marking out places where stages of the rocket are likely to fall back to Earth, the fourth and final no-go zone is significantly off-kilter, sitting well south of where it "should" fall if it were a [normal ballistic missile](#).

[On his blog](#), on which he typically tracks satellites in orbit, Langbroek suggested the unusual launch site might mean the missile will be of a new variety not yet trusted to be launched from a submarine. He speculated the unaligned splashdown zone could be a novel attempt at an oblique deployment of multiple independent reentry vehicles (MIRVs), which are maneuverable nuclear warheads carried atop a ballistic missile that can hit separate targets from one another. However, [The War Zone's](#) Joseph Trevithick suggested a still more audacious option: what if this mysterious test is to be the debut of France's "V-Max" experimental hypersonic weapon? In 2019, [Paris announced](#) it was hopping into the rat race for a Mach 5-capable missile, tapping ArianeGroup, maker of its M51 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), to develop a new "Véhicule Manoeuvrant Expérimental" (V-Max) glide vehicle. Defense Minister Florence Parly predicted the missile would fly for the first time before the end of 2021.

A glide vehicle would explain the odd placement of the final splashdown site: unlike traditional ballistic missiles, hypersonic glide vehicles are extremely maneuverable, meaning it could deviate significantly from the trajectory laid out by the launch.

But not so fast: experts told the War Zone that it's unlikely France's first test of such a weapon would be a full-range flight like this. Indeed, when the US finally [attempted to test-fire](#) its

AGM-183 Air-launched Rapid Response Air Weapon (ARRW) earlier this month after years of captive-carry tests, it was only supposed to test the rocket engine, not the glide vehicle. Unfortunately for the US Air Force, it failed to even do that, [staying firmly attached](#) to the wing of the B-52 bomber carrying it.

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US Pledges 'All Available Tools' to Support Somalia's Farmaajo as Term Extension Bid Crumbles
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The African Horn nation of Somalia has large mineral and hydrocarbon reserves, including petroleum and uranium, but decades of brutal war and civil war have largely blocked multinational firms from extracting them until fairly recently, when the pro-US government began signing offshore gas exploration deals.

After the lower house of the Somali parliament voted earlier this month to settle an ongoing dispute over election rules and extend President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed's term by two years, dissident groups have moved to oppose him, taking up positions around the capital city. Mohamed, better known as simply "Farmaajo," was [due to address](#) the nation on Tuesday after Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble sided with two federal states that disagreed with the term extension and some military units took up guard positions in parts of Mogadishu, not all of which are loyal to Roble.

One commander and potential election challenger to Farmaajo, Abdulkadir Mohamed Warsame, told [Agence France-Presse](#) the president "is a dictator" who "wants to stay in power with force."

"We need a government, not a dictatorship defying the norms of the land," Warsame said. "We are against that, we will continue fighting until he leaves ... We will not stop our fighting - we can stop only when we die."

The news outlet reported that the soldiers were directing residents in certain communities of the capital to leave town ahead of likely fighting. After gunshots rang out the previous night and three security officers were killed, many families had already arrived at the same decision. Roble decried the violence and has called for calm, [urging security forces](#) "not to mingle with politics," although he also endorsed a joint statement by two of Somalia's five federal states - Galmudug and Hirshabelle - calling for a cancellation of Farmaajo's term extension and preparations for a new election to be held.

Deadlock Over Election Rules

The parliament's lower house voted on April 12 for a de facto extension of Farmaajo's term by two years, in an attempt to settle a fierce disagreement over how voting would proceed in that election. Farmaajo's term was due to expire in February. While the five states broadly agreed in September 2020 to change the country's election system to a [more traditional system](#) of indirect elections by which traditional elders and civil society groups choose delegates who are

nominated to the parliament, a great deal remains to be hashed out about how exactly the changes would be implemented.

Farmaajo and three of the five Somali states - Galmudug, Hirshabelle, and South-West - thought the December vote should be held according to the old one-person-one-vote system, but Puntland and Jubaland insisted on the newer model, creating an impasse. Parliament's intervention earlier this month broke the impasse, deciding on a one-person-one-vote for the next election and giving officials two years to organize it.

However, with Galmudug and Hirshabelle now switching sides to oppose the term extension, Farmaajo is quickly becoming bereft of allies.

US to 'Consider All Available Tools'

Farmaajo is a close ally of the United States, and under his tenure, operations by US Africa Command against the al-Qaeda-aligned al-Shabaab militant group [expanded dramatically](#). He has also [overseen the expansion](#) of US and UK oil interests in the region, even appointing [the former head](#) of the British-owned Soma Oil and Gas, Hassan Ali Khaire, as his first prime minister.

In 2019, the US-based oil giants Shell and ExxonMobil began their return after decades of absence in the face of nonstop regional war and an unstable provisional government, signing a [new \\$1.7 million agreement](#) with Mogadishu to lease five offshore oil blocks for 30 years. Then in February of last year, they arrived at an ["initial roadmap"](#) for their expansion, and in May of that year began a new [round of licensing](#) for another seven offshore blocks.

According to [Offshore Technology](#), the 2008 Petroleum Law outlining the process for concessions was highly contentious, with Jubaland and Puntland being outvoted and subsequently leaving the licensing process.

The US has, accordingly, backed Farmaajo in the election dispute, and issued a statement decrying the violence and urging "all parties to exercise restraint and to resolve their differences peacefully."

"The United States is prepared to consider all available tools, including sanctions and visa restrictions, to respond to efforts to undermine peace and stability in Somalia," US State Department [spokesperson Ned Price](#) said on Monday.

On Tuesday, the US embassy in Mogadishu also intervened directly in the ongoing struggle, tweeting about a pre-dawn police raid against an independent media outlet in the capital.

The outlet, [Mustaqbal Media, wrote](#) Tuesday that Turkish-trained Haramcad armed officers had smashed up its offices in a 6 am raid, beaten one of its journalists, and seized a slew of recording and broadcast equipment.

"Radio Mustaqbal has been covering the [recent developments including](#)gunfight and street protests between security forces backing the federal government of Somalia and military forces backing the opposition - who oppose president Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo's term extension - in Mogadishu since Sunday morning. K4, where the radio locates, is among neighborhoods where both sides clashed on Sunday," the outlet wrote.

Former US President Donald Trump withdrew all 800 US troops from Somalia in late 2020, but [clandestine operations](#) have persisted, as well as airstrikes. Prior to the withdrawal, Somalia held the largest deployment of AFRICOM forces, and the move was hotly [contested by AFRICOM](#) leaders and some US lawmakers, who feared shifting US troops away to confront

China and Russia would create a vacuum in Africa in which al-Shabaab or Daesh could gain a new foothold.

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IDF Identifies Unsuccessful Launch of Two Rockets in Gaza
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After several days in which rockets were fired from Gaza into Israeli territory, Jerusalem moved to further restrict the territory's fishing zone to just nine miles from the coast.

According to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), air raid sirens sounded early Wednesday morning in Kissufim, a kibbutz near the border with Gaza, which they later identified as failed launches as both rockets [fell inside of Gaza](#).

In recent days, more than [30 rockets have been](#) fired from Gaza into Israeli territory, several of which were intercepted by Iron Dome missiles. While the IDF responded to some [rounds of firing](#) by returning fire with tanks and aircraft, the IDF was said [to be preparing](#) for a larger offensive after the number of rockets being fired began to sharply increase.

The weekend also saw [large demonstrations](#) across Gaza, including outside of a checkpoint between Gaza and Israel, in solidarity with Palestinian East Jerusalemites who had been attacked by both police and an [Israeli mob](#).

Israel's near-total blockade of Gaza since 2009 has severely curbed the government's ability to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to rage in Gaza even as Israel registers one of the highest vaccination rates against the virus of any nation. Basic medical and mechanical supplies are hard to come by.

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Israeli Military Claims to Have Downed Hezbollah Drone Crossing From Lebanon
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Israeli air defense systems recently failed to intercept an errant Syrian surface-to-air missile that overshot its target during an Israeli air raid in southern Syria. The missile flew for several hundred miles and landed in the Negev near Israel's Shimon Peres Negev Nuclear Research Center.

The Israeli Defense Forces ([IDF](#)) [claimed on Tuesday](#) evening to have shot down a glider launched by Hezbollah that wandered into northern Israel, as well as to have located another Hezbollah "skimmer" it had shot down near the border several weeks ago.

"We will continue to operate in order to prevent any attempt to violate Israeli sovereignty," the IDF statement added.

It is not known if the drones belonged to Hezbollah or what their mission might have been. However, in December, [Hezbollah said](#) it successfully sent a drone into Israeli territory during the IDF's "Lethal Arrow" drills and filmed two IDF bases before returning to Lebanon. Hezbollah also said they shot down an Israeli drone flying over southern Lebanon [in early February](#), which the IDF did not comment on.

Israel and Lebanon are still technically at war, following Israel's failed 2006 invasion of southern Lebanon, during which it was defeated and expelled by Hezbollah forces, but [new negotiations began](#) in October of last year, moderated by the US and driven by a desire to sort out their maritime border in the interests of pursuing offshore gas exploration.

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Shock G, Digital Underground Frontman and Early Collaborator of Tupac Shakur, Dead at 57

Gregory Edward Jacobs, known professionally as Shock G, was found dead in a hotel room in Tampa, Florida on Thursday. He was 57. No cause has been given for his death.

As one of the founders of the innovative rap group the Digital Underground, which formed in Oakland, California, in the late 1980s, Shock G rose to prominence as its enthusiastic and charismatic lead vocalist.

The band had such early-90s hits as "The Humpty Dance," "Doowutchyalike" and "Kiss You Back." Shock G was known for performing in different personas, most notably the character of Humpty Hump, in which he performed the trademark "Humpty Dance."

Humpty Hump had an exaggerated buffoon personality, colorful clothes and a Groucho Marx-style glasses-and-nose disguise.

The Digital Underground was also responsible for discovering the late rapper Tupac Shakur. Shakur's music debut for a major label was as a featured guest on "Same Song," a song where Shock G performs in both his regular and Humpty Hump personas.

"Same Song" was included in the soundtrack for the 1991 comedy film "Nothing But Trouble," wherein both Shock G and Shakur performed the song for Judge Valkenheiser, played by Dan Aykroyd, alongside the rest of the band.

Reacting to the news of Shock G's passing on Twitter, rapper Ice Cube wrote "RIP Shock-G/Humpty Hump. I remember when NWA's road manager Atron said he had a group called Digital Underground. He played DOWHATCHALIKE video & I went crazy. I had to sample DU on JACKIN FOR BEATS and WHO'S THE MACK. And nobody had a better stage show. A true Bay Area original."

Actresses Viola Davis and Leslie Jones were quick to pay homage to the late performer on Twitter as well.

Other fans and celebrities took to Twitter to pay tribute to the late trailblazer.

Shock G is just the latest prominent rapper to unexpectedly pass away, as Fat Boys member Prince Markie Dee died in February, and the rapper DMX also died suddenly just this month.

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Situation Room Decider - Political Cartoon

US President Joe Biden announced in early April that Washington would not be able to make its May deadline to remove all American troops from Afghanistan, noting instead that the Land of the Free would instead be pulling out forces by September 11 - the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks.

US Vice President Kamala Harris recently suggested that she played a [key role](#) in Biden's decision to withdraw all American forces out of Afghanistan by the new proposed deadline, acknowledging that she was indeed the last person in the room.

In an [interview](#) with CNN's Dana Bash, Harris confirmed that Biden has sought her take on major administration decisions, similar to the working relationship between Biden and former US President Barack Obama.

Asked whether Biden weighed on Harris regarding his Afghanistan decision, Harris confirmed the occurrence to Bash, adding that she felt "comfortable" with the outcome.

"He is someone, who I have seen over and over again, make decisions based on what he truly believes ... is the right thing to do," the vice president said. Biden is "acutely aware that it may not be politically popular, or advantageous for him personally; it's really something to see."

In the wake of Biden's Afghanistan decision, reports surfaced detailing that military brass and intelligence forces were not exactly thrilled with the move. In fact, [Politico reported](#) at the time that Biden pulled rank after military officials argued to keep some US troops in the country to ensure that the Taliban is kept in check.

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'It Will Only Get Worse': Trump Blasts 'Boring' Academy Awards Over Low Ratings
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Early figures released by marketing research company Nielsen recently indicated that the viewership for the 93rd Academy Awards on Sunday reached a devastatingly new low, as only 9.85 million viewers tuned in for the weekend affair. The figure represented a near 60% drop from 2020 numbers.

Former US President Donald Trump issued an unexpected statement on Tuesday that highlighted his disappointment in the award show's low ratings, predicting viewership would take an even bigger plunge should the framework of the event stay the same.

In a [statement](#) issued by Trump's post-presidency office, the former commander-in-chief complained that the show lost its attraction to viewers because organizers have implemented a "ridiculous formula" that will only cause viewership to plummet even further.

“What used to be called The Academy Awards, and now is called the ‘Oscars’ - a far less important and elegant name - had the lowest Television Ratings in recorded history, even much lower than last year, which set another record low,” Trump said. “If they keep with the current ridiculous formula, it will only get worse - if that’s possible.”

Although the annual award show has long been referred to as the Oscars, in line with the name given to the golden statuette handed to winners, the ceremony officially rebranded itself with the less formal title in 2013. At the time, officials with the event [explained](#) that the move was meant to bring the Academy Awards into the present.

Trump stated that organizers should take a trip down memory lane to pinpoint “the formula they used” some 15 years ago, and also needed to “bring back a great host” in order to turn the show’s ratings around.

The show has not enlisted an official host since 2019, when comedian-turned-actor Kevin Hart stepped down from the gig in light of backlash over [homophobic remarks](#) that resurfaced after being chosen for the post.

“Contagion” director Steven Soderbergh, who also served as a producer for the 2021 awards, [recently explained](#) that organizers were moving away from using a host yet again because of a desired change in the ceremony’s “overarching structure.”

The former president continued on blasting the organizers in his statement, urging the team to not “be so politically correct and boring, and do it right,” before turning to his politics-based argument.

“These television people spend all their time thinking about how to promote the Democrat Party, which is destroying our Country, and cancel Conservatives and Republicans. That formula certainly hasn’t worked very well for The Academy!”

The Tuesday fallout is far from the first time that Trump has weighed in on the show, especially when it comes to shining a light on the Oscars’ ratings. In [2018](#) and in [2019](#), Trump took the opportunity to call out the show for its declining audience reach.

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US Navy Fires Warning Shots After Three Iranian Vessels Make Close Approach in Persian Gulf by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

American and Iranian vessels previously came in close contact earlier this month in the international waters off the southern Persian Gulf, however, the April 2 encounter did not result in warning shots.

The US Navy revealed on Tuesday that US forces recently fired several warning shots against three vessels enlisted in the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) after they came in close contact with American service members.

The incident, which unfolded in the international waters off the northern Persian Gulf, took place on April 26 at approximately 8 p.m. local time and involved American vessels USS Firebolt and the US Coast Guard patrol boat Baranoff.

The service's [Tuesday release](#) indicates that an IRGCN vessel had come within an "unnecessarily close range with unknown intent," and that its closest approach was 68 yards to both US ships.

"Firebolt and Baranoff were conducting routine maritime security operations in international waters during the time of the incident," the release reads. "The US crews issued multiple warnings via bridge-to-bridge radio and loud-hailer devices, but the IRGCN vessels continued their close maneuvers."

"The crew of the Firebolt then fired warning shots, and the IRGCN vessels moved away to a safe distance from the US vessels," the notice explains, adding that American forces had "proactively communicated" with Iranian forces in an effort to "reduce the risk of calculation, avoid a collision" and, of course, to "de-escalate the situation."

The April 26 incident comes weeks after the US Navy [announced](#) that several Iranian fast-attack crafts had approached two US vessels while carrying out maritime patrols in the region. The April 2 altercation lasted for some three hours.

The tense encounter also comes on the heels of renewed talks between US and Iranian officials seeking to normalize ties and restore stipulations agreed to under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

The US officially withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018 over allegations that Iran had violated the agreement. As a result, Washington reimposed a series of previously lifted sanctions and carried out a "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran.

Both the US and Iran have called on one another to act first before either party agrees to come back to the terms listed in the JCPOA. Iran has repeatedly indicated that it will only agree to the terms that were previously drawn out, whereas the US officials have weighed the possibility of add-on stipulations.

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US State Department Urges Americans to Leave Afghanistan 'ASAP'
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

To date, an estimated 80% of countries have been placed on a "do not travel" advisory list by the US State Department for varying reasons, with the novel coronavirus being one of the more cited reasons.

The US State Department issued a new travel advisory on Tuesday that called on all Americans interested in leaving Afghanistan to do so "as soon as possible."

The [new alert](#) urges Americans against traveling to the Middle Eastern country due to "COVID-19, crime, terrorism, civil unrest, kidnapping and armed conflict."

[Figures](#) provided by Worldometer state that Afghanistan has registered nearly 60,000 new COVID-19 cases to date, with reports having increased throughout the last several months. An estimated 204 new COVID-19 cases were documented on Monday.

"US citizens wishing to depart Afghanistan should leave as soon as possible on available commercial flights," the announcement reads, putting the nation under a "level 4: do not travel" warning. Level 4 is the highest level that the State Department issues.

The notice further indicates that the agency ordered the majority of employees stationed at the US Embassy in Kabul to evacuate and that as such, routine services would be difficult to provide to Americans within Afghanistan.

"Evacuation options from Afghanistan are extremely limited due to the lack of infrastructure, geographic constraints, and the volatile security situation," the agency explains.

An earlier update provided by the State Department saw about 80% of countries worldwide being upgraded to a "do not travel" designation as a result of the pandemic. At the time, an agency official [told CNBC](#) that the "updated framework will help Americans make better-informed decisions about the safety of international travel."

The mid-April [update](#) saw countries including Canada, France and Mexico being recategorized under the level 4 advisory.

The latest development also comes as both American and NATO forces have begun [withdrawal procedures](#) from bases in Afghanistan. While the military bloc intends to have troops fully withdrawn by May 1, US President Joe Biden recently announced US forces would be gone by September 11 - the 20th anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the US.

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US Lawmakers Question Future of Afghan Women's Rights as Troops Ready to Leave Afghanistan

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

The announcement of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan have many worried about what this will mean for the established rights of Afghan women, youth and minority groups. As negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban continue, many hope women's rights will remain a part of their move forward.

Zalmay Khalilzad, a special representative for the Afghanistan reconciliation, on Tuesday [testified](#) before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on policy in Afghanistan to detail its commitments to preserving the gains of minority men and women. During this meeting, congressional lawmakers questioned Khalilzad over whether recent US progress in Afghanistan would remain established.

Nearly two weeks after US President Joe Biden decided to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan, many lawmakers remained skeptical of the decision because of fear that the Taliban's continued influence would reinstitute many oppressive and violent rules on women. Khalilzad maintained that if the Afghan government wanted to keep US security efforts and sustain military personnel, they would need incentive and advocacy as part of the negotiations. Khalilzad added that if the Afghan government did not live up to the global standards of women's rights, then the US had "other instruments that will remain relevant and powerful to send that message loud and clear."

Some US lawmakers suggested increasing sanctions on Afghanistan if the government did not continue efforts to maintain women's rights, in which Khalilzad maintained that if the Taliban did not continue to respect human rights, they could not account on assistance from US and NATO allies to continue to provide support.

"Our commitment to continue with a strong partnership with Afghanistan has been clear," Khalilzad added, but repeated that it would not be something that could be forced on the Afghan people. "The Afghans will make their own choices and the United States in return will respond to that and make its decisions."

Khalilzad, who previously served as a UN ambassador, has for many years participated in the negotiations regarding women's rights since the start of the US' influence in Afghanistan in the early 2000s. According to Khalilzad, he helped to reestablish the [Afghan constitution](#) in 2004 so that it stipulated Afghan women were equal to the men.

In 2009, under then-Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the government established the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law, but [according to some](#), it did not offer much relief to many women under the standards set by US influence.

Afghanistan has battled the US over religious and traditional treatment of women, which under Taliban rule during the 1990s made headlines as being oppressive and violent. The Afghan government and Taliban have held peace talks, most recently in [Moscow](#), but some have worried that the negotiations did not include a push for women's rights.

From 1996 to 2001, the United States spent \$780 million to promote women's rights in Afghanistan. This year, Biden promised another [\\$300 million](#) to be contributed to US influence in sustaining women's rights in the country. During the Tuesday Senate hearing, lawmakers questioned Khalilzad on whether or not the other \$300 million would need to be renegotiated as part of an incentive.

['Overwhelming Evidence' of US War Crimes in Afghanistan Will Be Probed by ICC](#)

Khalilzad maintained that the money was the incentive, but claimed that though women's rights was of high importance, he doesn't "have a fix for the checks and balances and the process of negotiation when the decisions are made." Pakistan has also been cited as a necessary tool in the continued talks.

In a report by Voice of America (VOA), the Taliban has remained strong in maintaining their cultural and religious beliefs as they pertain to women and tradition, but have attempted to readapt to the changing global perspectives.

"We can not justify women's rights on the basis of the values that exist in the United States, in Europe and other countries. Our nation does not want this at all. Our nation is Muslim," said Mohammad Naim, the Taliban political office spokesperson in Qatar.

[Thousands](#) of US troops have remained in Qatar as the US has maintained that the presence is necessary to decrease the spread of the Taliban's beliefs.

According to the [New York Times](#), US efforts to make women a part of the peace talks have long spread through the country, influencing many activists who now feel as though the US presence was just for propaganda.

"I remember when Americans came and they said that they will not leave us alone, and that Afghanistan will be free of oppression, and will be free of war and women's rights will be protected," Shahida Husain, an activist in Afghanistan's southern Kandahar Province, where the Taliban now control large stretches of territory, told the outlet.

"Now it looks like it was just slogans."

Afghanistan continues to try to make efforts to readapt to global changes that go against the strict traditional views. However, many Afghan women maintain that while women do deserve to increase their presence, they also want to do so under the values of their culture and beliefs.

"Every Afghan woman wants to lead her daily life, government, social and political work based on Islamic and Afghan cultural values," said Sharifa Zurmati, member of the Afghan peace talks delegation, during an interview with VOA.

government/NATO control. White areas show areas under Taliban or al-Qaeda control. Black areas show areas controlled by Daesh.

While the negotiations continue between men, women are attempting to hold more of a voice in the decisions going forward.

"All the time, women are the victims of men's wars," Raihana Azad of the Afghan parliament told the Times, "but they will be the victims of their peace too."

During the Senate Committee meeting, Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) named many women as victims of violence in efforts to convince lawmakers that the presence of US troops would be something that reflected on larger human rights issues. Many lawmakers agreed but held on to the idea that it was something the Afghan government would have to negotiate on their own terms in order to be considered part of the overall global efforts.

"If Afghanistan with or without the Taliban wants to be a country that is respected globally then they have to live up to their commitment on human rights," said Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD) during the meeting.

US troops are scheduled to be fully withdrawn by September 11, months past the original May 1 deadline agreed to under the Trump administration.

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Biden Admin to Hold Direct Conversations With Russia Regarding Moscow's Retaliation to Sanctions

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this month, US President Joe Biden signed an executive order imposing sanctions on a number of Russian entities and individuals over their alleged interference in the 2020 US presidential election, and the purported involvement in a "cyber espionage campaign" that exploited the SolarWinds platform. The Kremlin has denied such allegations.

A senior Biden administration official revealed on Tuesday that US and Russian officials intend to discuss and clarify their respective positions regarding sanctions, which have inflamed tensions between the two nations and led to fallout in recent weeks.

"We will be having a very direct conversation with Russian counterparts in the coming days, and already have done so," the official said, noting that Washington does not wish to escalate tensions with Moscow.

Following the imposition of [sanctions](#) against 32 Russian entities and individuals, Washington moved to expel 10 Russian diplomats from the US and block US entities from securing Russian government bonds.

Moscow condemned the sanctions and, in response, banned eight US citizens from entering Russia, including Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray.

Though the White House has claimed the anti-Russia sanctions are not an attempt to escalate bilateral tensions, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei [Lavrov warned](#) that such economic actions by the US could return the nations to a Cold War era.

As US and Russian counterparts prepare for their reported meeting regarding sanctions, additional bilateral dialogues may be on the horizon, as Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov revealed on Tuesday that Russian President Vladimir Putin is seeking to initiate US-Russia negotiations on strategic weapons and global stability.

"The negotiations could be aimed at creating an environment for a conflict-free coexistence," he remarked, noting that the invitation has already been extended to the Biden administration.

Earlier, Ryabkov pointed to Washington's unwillingness to have a "professional conversation on the basis of equality and mutual consideration to one another's interests."

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US, Israel Agree to Create Working Group to Counter Iranian Drones, Missiles
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US and Israeli officials met in-person at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, DC, on Tuesday to discuss Iran's alleged nuclear endeavors and share so-called sensitive information that, due to security concerns, could not be discussed in a virtual meeting.

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, Israeli National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, and several other US and Israeli officials agreed that the two nations should form an inter-agency working group to counter the "growing threat of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and Precision Guided Missiles produced by Iran and provided to its proxies in the Middle East Region."

According to the White House readout on the April 27 meeting, the government officials also concurred that "Iran's aggressive behavior" in the Middle East poses a significant threat. Based on this determination, US officials communicated that US President Joe Biden and his administration have "unwavering support for Israel's right to defend itself."

Prior to Tuesday's meeting, Sullivan and Ben-Shabbat's bilateral strategic group met twice in virtual meetings. Per Israeli [media reports](#), officials called for an in-person meeting to share sensitive information.

"The United States updated Israel on the talks in Vienna and emphasized strong US interest in consulting closely with Israel on the nuclear issue going forward," the readout detailed.

The consultations likely relate to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which has been the subject of several meetings in Vienna, Austria.

Last week, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani [expressed](#) that the US and Iran could soon reach an agreement regarding the JCPOA - so long as Washington remains "honest" in negotiations. At the same time, some Israeli officials have disagreed with the ongoing US-Iran negotiations, and have spoken out in support of the "maximum pressure" approach of former US President Donald Trump's administration.

"Maybe the Americans want to believe they will get a better deal down the road," an Israeli diplomat told Israel Hayom, "but the moment they return to the original agreement they lose all leverage with Iran, which has no interest whatsoever in altering it. This promise is either a lie or pretending to be naive."

Social media footage shows Sullivan and others exiting the Embassy.

Meeting attendees included Israeli Ambassador to the US Gilad Erdan, National Security Council (NSC) Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk and Barbara Leaf, Biden's nominee for assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs.

Officials also discussed the dozens of rockets launched from Gaza into Israel. Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system intercepted a number of rockets and members of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) returned fire in some cases.

The IDF [most recently](#) identified two unsuccessful launches from Gaza that failed to leave the territory.

"The U.S. strongly condemned the recent indiscriminate rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel," noting the Biden administration will continue to support a "two-state solution."

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CDC: Fully Vaccinated Americans No Longer Need Masks Outside, Unless in Large Groups by [Evan Craighead](#)

As of Tuesday, close to 142 million Americans, or 43% of the adult US population, have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, according to data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). More than 96 million Americans, or 29% of the adult US population, have been fully vaccinated.

As efforts to curb COVID-19 infections and symptoms continue, the CDC announced a series of new related guidelines and recommendations on Tuesday.

"Fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear a mask outdoors, except in certain crowded settings and venues," the public health agency detailed, just weeks after declaring that fully vaccinated Americans could resume travel at "low risk."

As for fully vaccinated employees, those who have been exposed to the novel coronavirus "no longer need to be restricted from work," so long as the employee is "asymptomatic."

"Fully vaccinated residents of non-healthcare congregate settings no longer need to quarantine following a known exposure," the CDC stated.

The agency also released a graphic detailing its face mask guidance for both "unvaccinated people" and "fully vaccinated people."

In short, the CDC still advises all Americans to don face masks when indoors.

Additionally, the agency highlighted that those with a weakened immune system should consult their doctor before adopting the new guidelines.

Naturally, many Americans were critical of the CDC's updated guidance -- but for different reasons.

A number of individuals online expressed confusion and skepticism concerning the change in recommendations.

On the other hand, netizens who appeared to support the Biden administration and the CDC expressed they would continue to wear don face masks when outside to ensure optimal protection.

Relatedly, the US Department of State announced on Monday that, beginning August 1, some international students and academics will be able to apply for a National Interest Exception (NIE) and resume schooling in the US upon approval.

The travel restrictions were previously put into place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Qualifying countries include China, Iran, Brazil and South Africa.

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Saudi Crown Prince: Kingdom at 90% Agreement With Biden Administration Policies
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Saudi Arabia has remained one of the US' largest trading partners in the Middle East, with business ties linked to the founding of the oil-rich kingdom in 1932. US-Saudi ties saw a boost under former US President Donald Trump, who saw his presidency rise alongside the 2017 ascendancy of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman recently highlighted the importance of the US as its strategic ally, claiming that the kingdom agrees with US President Joe Biden on nearly 90% of his administration's policies.

"We are in agreement throughout 90% of the policy of President Biden," the crown prince said during an interview that aired on local Saudi television on Tuesday. "We hope to enhance it one way or another."

The crown prince spoke more in his interview, which aired on [Al Arabiya English](#), about Saudi Arabia's [Vision 2030 plan](#). He brought up recent efforts by Saudi Arabia to oblige by objectives put in place by the global move towards addressing climate change.

"The last was our adherence to the new group that has important objectives for clean energy and environment. Saudi Arabia was one of the countries that joined," he added, speaking of recent reports that the country had announced it would join the US, Canada, Norway and Qatar in talks about oil and gas production as it relates to the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Saudi Arabia is the world's biggest crude exporter, but the crown prince has announced efforts by the country to reduce carbon emissions by generating the use of renewable energy under [standards set](#) by the UN sustainable development goals initiative. He announced that the country would sell 1% of its state oil firm Saudi Aramco, the world's biggest oil company.

"The US is a strategic ally to the kingdom, they are our partners for more than 80 years and this has quite a big impact on the US as well," Crown Prince Mohammed emphasized, referring to the increase in oil and gas prices, as the country makes efforts to move towards sustainable development.

"You could imagine if the \$10 million of oil, cheap oil goes from \$3 million to \$6 million if their contracts were to go to the UK, the US wouldn't be in its current situation today."

The crown prince spoke more on the changing need for oil during the interview, and emphasized Saudi Arabia's attempts to remain a part of the global efforts. His remarks come after Biden [spoke with](#) the King of Saudi Arabia in lieu of the crown prince before the release of a US intelligence report that assessed that the crown prince approved the operation to "capture or kill" journalist Jamal Khashoggi - a longtime critic of the royal family - in October 2018.

In the past, the crown prince has maintained that as the killing took place under his watch, he would be held [responsible](#), but denied any involvement. Still, many see this as a blatant disregard for [human rights](#), which Biden has threatened to bring to justice. The crown prince also spoke on the kingdom's strategic partnerships with Russia, India and China, but wishes to continue efforts in increasing ties with Iran.

"We are working with our regional and global partners to find solutions to these problems and we hope to overcome them for good relations that benefit everyone," he added, but claimed that his country would not accept interference in its internal affairs.

According to [reports](#), senior Saudi and Iranian officials had direct talks in efforts to improve relations between the neighboring countries. This comes [after months](#) of both countries having played a game of drone wars. The crown prince reinforced his efforts to fight against extremist ideology.

US relations in the Middle East have recently undergone a spike in tensions following the announcement by Biden that American forces stationed in Afghanistan would be [removed](#) from the Middle Eastern country. The crown prince's remarks also come on the heels of reports that [Qatar](#) would be increasing its US presence following tensions prompted by Saudi-led disputes in the Persian Gulf.

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ANALYSIS - US Mental Illness Surge Could Revolutionize Therapy

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Pandemic containment measures that triggered a rise in the demand for mental health care also forced innovations in treatment that could have the United States better prepared for the next pandemic, therapists told Sputnik.

Nearly 50 percent of Americans said they considered getting mental health treatment as a direct result of the pandemic, according to a Vida Health survey published earlier this year, while a recent Kaiser Foundation study found the number of people seeking therapy rose by 20% during the course of 2020.

TRANSFORMING LIVES, REVOLUTIONIZING THERAPY

Meanwhile, although the number of people suffering from mental illness during the pandemic has increased, the number of suicides actually dropped, The New York Times reported earlier in April based on an analysis of health agency data.

Investigators with the International COVID-19 Suicide Prevention Research Collaboration (ICSPRC) came to similar conclusions in a recent global study of suicides. They speculated that government economic rescue packages that covered mental health services may have lessened the strain of the lockdowns.

"It has revolutionized the way we do therapy," Dr. Jeff Gardere, a psychologist with a private practice in Manhattan, told Sputnik. "We're still learning about how it's changed our culture." Gardere, who is also an associate professor at Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine, said COVID-19 has fundamentally altered the way Americans live – from remote working to online schooling - and, in turn, has changed the way treatment is delivered. And some of these changes, Gardere added, will likely be a part of life for the foreseeable future.

"We're all dealing with and affected by the idea of shared space and we're also watching a real estate revolution," Gardere said. "This scared us to death, but it is what it is. It's not good or bad. The important thing is that we've adapted."

Dr. Ramel Kweku Akyirefi Smith, a clinical and sports psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told Sputnik that he had to move quickly to adapt, which has spurred a burst of creativity and innovation in helping patients find new ways to cope mentally and emotionally.

Florida-based Marriage and Family Therapist Shari Warner said out of this new reality a number of people saw an opportunity to exploit the situation and actually flourished by discovering new skills and interests such as art, music, and writing. Some have even created their own podcasts. Warner said Americans had to mentally deal with a "mash pit" of issues in addition to the pandemic.

"They have had to deal with social media madness and how not to get caught up in a rabbit hole of medical, political and racial issues," Warner told Sputnik. "People had to develop mental and emotional muscles."

Gardere said the next challenge will be balancing climate change with what assuredly will be the emergence of more viruses.

"If this happened [COVID-19 outbreak] so easily, it will happen again," Gardere said. "We weren't prepared for this. Now we're prepared and know what it looks like."

DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, ANGER

Gardere said many of his patients, as a result of the lockdowns, are experiencing anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and sleep and appetite disruptions - including overeating and excessive drinking.

He is concerned about the over-dependence on screens, devices, and the internet and the negative impact on interpersonal skills. Social distancing and quarantining, Gardere added, has also had a devastating impact on relationships.

"The inability to touch and hug people will make people more isolated and distrustful," Gardere explained.

Meanwhile, he said, anxiety and depression in children has almost quadrupled.

"We're seeing increases in admissions and visits among teens suffering from anxiety and panic attacks," Gardere said. "Those families that already had issues with family and relationship dysfunction are struggling."

Smith said many Americans who have been unemployed are feeling like captives in their own homes. The isolation is fueling rage and anger for being bumped which has caused a deterioration in character and social coping skills, Smith added.

"I call it the COVID Effect: people are frustrated and want to fight," Smith said.

Florida-based marriage and family therapist Shari Warner said people are not used to being isolated and unable to interact on their own, which has prompted a rise in depression.

WOMEN, BLACKS DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED

The same Kaiser survey also found that women and minorities were being impacted the most by the pandemic. Nearly 70% of women under 30 believe the COVID-19 crisis negatively affected their mental health, according to the findings.

Women are also feeling the brunt of the pandemic-induced mental illness as victims of domestic violence. Gardere said the pandemic is triggering pre-existing mental health problems which are partly responsible for a recent spike in this phenomenon.

Smith said rage driven by unemployment has made things even worse with women becoming the targets of frustration.

"It's death by a thousand cuts," Smith said. "We're seeing murder rates and domestic violence increase in astounding numbers. Women and other victims may be trying to survive domestic violence at home and in virtual school spaces. We saw people having sex, murders and molestation."

Although suicides in the US overall dropped last year, the rate among nonwhites rose, according to The New York Times study.

Smith noted that Black people are being disproportionately killed by the pandemic, which also has a ripple negative mental impact on families and communities.

He said significant numbers of Blacks, Latinos and women are on the frontlines in hospitals, senior citizens homes, grocery stores and retail establishments, putting themselves at risk.

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RPT - PREVIEW - Biden to Address US Congress Ahead of Being 100 Days in Office
WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday will address a joint session of Congress to report on the accomplishments of his administration during almost 100 days of his presidency and lay out plans for the future.

Biden is expected to take credit for the coronavirus vaccination campaign that he says is paving a way for reopening the US economy. Biden will likely promote his \$2.3 trillion plan to renovate US infrastructure, his most ambitious and controversial initiative yet.

"It's... an opportunity to speak directly to the American people about the progress that has been made, the work that is still ahead," the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

Following a series of mass shootings with multiple victims Biden may call on Congress to introduce tougher gun controls, advocate police reform to address the problem of racially

motivated brutality and raise the issue of illegal migration that has tremendously increased since he came into office on pledges of a more humane treatment of asylum-seekers.

On foreign policy, Biden is likely to speak about strengthening US-led alliances and multilateralism in dealing with global challenges like the climate change and coronavirus pandemic. He may also address an upcoming US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, efforts to revive the nuclear agreement with Iran, strategic competition with China and a desire to stabilize relations with Russia while holding it to account for alleged misdeeds.

Due to coronavirus restrictions, the event will be drastically scaled down with a total number of attendees expected at around 200 compared to as many as 1,600 people in previous years. There will be no guests are expected at the Capitol building. Most of the Cabinet members will be watching the speech from their offices or homes eliminating the need to choose a designated survivor - a senior official who stays in a secure location in case a disaster kills the president and other US leaders. According to media reports, a number of lawmakers may also skip the address as it is scheduled for when the Senate is in session, but the House of Representatives is out.

Biden's speech is not considered an official State of the Union address, an annual custom dating back to 1790. According to the Congressional Research Service, Biden's six predecessors chose not to have a full-fledged State of the Union speech having just previously delivered an inaugural address. Instead they opted to deliver an address before a joint session of the Congress.

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RPT - US Expects Relation With Russia to Remain Challenged, Aims for Stable Ties - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United State expects relations with Russia to remain difficult, however, it hopes for stable and predictable ties, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"We expect this relationship to remain a challenge and it is one we are prepared for," the spokesperson said Tuesday. "Our goal is to have a relationship with Russia that is predictable and stable."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in an interview on Tuesday said that the United States and Russia can work on mutual interests such as strategic stability and extending the New START arms control treaty if tensions with Moscow de-escalate.

The United States and Russia are currently working on possibly holding a summit between President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin in the early summer.

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US Treasury Chief, 'Five Eyes' Counterparts Discuss Response to COVID-19 - Public Affairs

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and her counterparts from Australia, New Zealand and the UK in a teleconference discussed the economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Public Affairs Office said in a statement.

"Today US Treasury Secretary Janet L. Yellen participated in a conference call hosted by Australian Treasurer Josh Frydenberg with finance ministers of the 'Five Eyes Countries' including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The ministers reviewed the economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic and each country's medium-term fiscal approaches to support a strong and sustainable economic recovery," the readout said on Tuesday.

Yellen, the release added, also emphasized that by using all available policy tools their combined domestic economies can help support the global economy.

While the Five Eyes alliance was founded as a way to enhance intelligence sharing and cooperation between the nations, it has come to refer more generally to the collection of five countries, which also includes Canada.

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US Tries to Avoid Miscalculations When Coming Across IRGC Vessels at Sea - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States tries to avoid miscalculations with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) navy vessels when they come in close proximity at sea, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby told reporters.

Earlier on Tuesday, the US Navy said a military vessel crew fired warning shots in the Persian Gulf after three Iranian Islamic IRGC navy vessels came within close proximity of their ships.

"Broadly speaking, we obviously want to see tensions de-escalate, we don't want to see miscalculations," Kirby said on Tuesday. "Unsafe and unprofessional activity by the IRGC navy is not new. It has been a persistent problem for a long time."

Kirby said this kind of harassment is largely conducted by the IRGC navy, not the Iranian state navy, using small fast boats.

The incident occurred on Monday in international waters in the north Arabian Gulf, according to the US Navy.

The US Navy said armed IRGC speed boats rapidly approached US Navy patrol coastal ship USS Firebolt and US Coast Guard patrol boat Baranoff to an unnecessarily close range with unknown intent, including a closest point of approach of 68 yards to both US ships.

The US crews issued multiple warnings through bridge-to-bridge radio and loud-hailer devices, but the IRGC vessels continued their close range maneuvers. The crew of Firebolt ship then fired warning shots, resulting in the IRGC vessels moving away to a safe distance from the US vessels.

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Biden is expected to take credit for the coronavirus vaccination campaign that he says is paving a way for reopening the US economy. Biden will likely promote his \$2.3 trillion plan to renovate US infrastructure, his most ambitious and controversial initiative yet.

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US, UK Trade Chiefs Meet to Discuss Subsidies, Aircraft Dispute

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The trade representatives from the United States and the United Kingdom met virtually to discuss a range of issues, including subsidies and the ongoing dispute over civil aircraft, the Office of the US Trade Representative said in a readout of the conversation.

"United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai today met virtually with UK Secretary of State for International Trade Elizabeth Truss to discuss the G7 Trade Track and how this work can contribute to improving the lives of workers. Ambassador Tai also expressed her interest in collaborating on addressing topics of mutual interest, including industrial subsidies, climate change and the large civil aircraft dispute," the readout said on Tuesday.

The United States filed a case with the World Trade Organization in 2006, accusing European aircraft manufacturer Airbus of receiving billions of dollars in illegal subsidies. The EU filed a counterclaim against US subsidies to manufacturer Boeing and the WTO ultimately ruled that both sides illegally subsidized their respective aircraft companies.

In March, the European Union and the United States agreed to suspend all duties related to the WTO disputes for an initial period of four months.

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Biden Administration Eases Process for Native Americans to Re-Acquire Historic Lands

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The US Interior Department has rolled back a Trump-era policy that made it difficult for Native American tribes to re-acquire historic lands from the federal government, the agency said in a press release.

"Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland issued Secretary's Order 3400, which re-delegates the authority to review and approve applications to place land into trust to the Bureau of Indian Affairs regional directors... This action reverses steps taken in 2017 that unnecessarily elevated land-into-trust decisions to the Department's headquarters staff, increasing the complexity of the decision-making process and causing delays," the release said on Tuesday.

US federal policies that are more than a hundred years old have eroded tribal lands in the United States, the release said.

Haaland, who is the first Native American to hold a Cabinet position in US government, said in the release that the Interior Department has an obligation to work with tribes to protect their lands and her order will help tribes determine how their lands are used.

In October, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez told Sputnik that the tribe hoped the November election would bring new US leadership that would improve relations with Native American tribes and give them a voice in Washington to help determine US policy that would allow them to co-manage Indian lands, park lands, and other federal lands Native Americans deem to be important.

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Raytheon Wins \$175Mln US Army Contract for Javelin Missiles, Sales to Taiwan, Lithuania

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Raytheon and Lockheed Martin Javelin have won a more than \$175 million modification contract to provide the US Army with more Javelin Weapon System, including sales to Lithuania and Taiwan, the US Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Raytheon/Lockheed Martin Javelin [in] Tucson, Arizona, was awarded a \$175,936,936 modification ...contract for the Javelin Weapon System, the release said on Tuesday. Work on the contract will be performed in Tucson, Arizona, with an estimated completion date of November. 30, 2023. Fiscal 2010 Foreign Military Sales funds for Lithuania and Taiwan and 2021 missile procurement, Army funds in the amount of \$175,936,936 were obligated for the deal, the release said.

The US Army Contracting Command at Redstone Arsenal in the state of Alabama is the contracting activity, the release added.

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US Army Orders Nearly \$215Mln More Multiple Rocket Launch Systems From Lockheed - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control has won a \$214,708,838 US Army modification contract for the M270A2 Multiple Launch Rocket System, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control [of] Grand Prairie, Texas was awarded a \$214,708,838 modification ...contract for the M270A2 Multiple Launch Rocket System," the release said on Tuesday.

Work will be performed in Grand Prairie, Texas; Camden, Texas; and New Boston, Texas, with an estimated completion date of September 30, 2024, the release said.

The US Army Contracting Command at Redstone Arsenal in the state of Alabama is the contracting activity, the release added.

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US, Israel Agree to Establish Working Group to Counter Iran Drones, Missiles - White House

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The US and Israeli national security advisors met on Tuesday to discuss bilateral relations and agreed to form a working group to help address the threat of Iranian drone and missile attacks, the White House said.

"The United States and Israel agreed to establish an inter-agency working group to focus particular attention on the growing threat of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and Precision Guided Missiles produced by Iran and provided to its proxies in the Middle East Region," the White House said.

The announcement comes in the wake of rocket attacks launched from Gaza into Israel that the United States has strongly condemned. The meeting also took place amid ongoing negotiations in Vienna between the United States and Iran on renewing the 2015 nuclear agreement.

The United States updated Israel on the current state of the talks in Vienna and said they will be consulting with the Israelis moving forward.

The Biden administration reaffirmed its commitment to Israel's security and the US-Israel partnership, as well as its support of a two-state solution for the Israel-Palestine conflict - a position that Israel has historically opposed.

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Blinken Says US, Russia Can Work on Strategic Stability if Putin Chooses Not to Escalate

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in an interview that the United States and Russia can work on mutual interests such as strategic stability and extending the New START arms control treaty if tensions with Moscow de-escalate.

"If he chooses not to escalate, then I think there are areas where we can work together out of our mutual shared interests," Blinken said in a CNN interview that aired Tuesday. "For example, strategic stability, extended New START - there's more to be done in that area."

The United States and Russia are currently working on possibly holding a summit between President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin in the early summer.

The Russian Foreign Ministry condemned earlier the latest round of US sanctions against Russia as running contrary to the interests of the two nations. In response, Russia banned eight US citizens from entering the country, including US Attorney General Merrick Garland, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines and FBI Director Christopher Wray.

The United States recently imposed sanctions on 32 Russian entities and individuals as part of a new round of sanctions over Moscow's alleged cyberattacks and other hostile acts against US interests. Washington also expelled 10 Russian diplomats from the country and prohibited US entities from purchasing Russian government bonds during primary placements.

According to charges laid out by the Biden administration, Russian intelligence was behind last year's SolarWinds hack on US information technology systems. Russia was also accused of interfering in the 2020 US election and waging chemical warfare. Moscow has denied the allegations as groundless.

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Biden to Meet With Former US President Carter While in Georgia Thursday - White House

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and the First Lady Jill Biden will meet with former President Jimmy Carter and his wife on Thursday, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

"The President and First Lady will travel to Plains, GA tomorrow to meet with Former President Carter and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter," Psaki said via Twitter on Tuesday. "I meant Thursday, April 29th."

Biden and other US officials will commence their tour to a number of states after the president's joint address to Congress on Wednesday, including a visit to Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

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Columbia Class Nuclear Submarines on Schedule for 2024 Delivery - Naval Operation Chief

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The US Navy's construction program is on schedule to deliver the remaining Strategic Ballistic Missile next-generation Columbia-class submarines over the next three years, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Michael Gilday told a Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments podcast.

"The path we are on right now will deliver Block 3 and Block 4 Columbia's by 2024 we'll be on the cusp of delivering Block 5 Virginia's (the previous generation of US nuclear submarines), Gilday told the podcast on Tuesday.

Newport News and Electric Boat have built and delivered 19 Virginia-class submarines.

Construction on the 10th submarine of the Block V is expected to begin in early 2024,

NavalNews.com noted on April 1.

However, the US Navy's nuclear submarine building and maintenance industrial base is under strain as Virginia-class parts have been wearing out early; Implications For Columbia-Class, US Naval Institute (USNI) News reported on April 20.

In November 2020, the US Navy awarded General Dynamics Electric Boat a \$9.4 billion contract to start building the first two Columbia-class nuclear submarines. The Department of Defense expects to have 12 Columbia submarines in service in the 2030s.

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US, Russia Discussing Timing of Possible Summit Meeting - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that he does not know if Russian President Vladimir Putin has officially accepted an invitation to meet with his counterpart Joe Biden, but both sides are already discussing holding a potential summit.

"I don't know if there is a formal acceptance but I know we are talking about it, we are talking about the timing of such a meeting," Blinken said in an interview with CNN.

Biden had offered Putin to meet during the summer in one of the European countries.

Expectations are that the summit may be held in early June during Biden's first overseas trip as US president.

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Attacks on 5 Victims at US Turkish Restaurant Result in Hate Crimes Charges- Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - A federal grand jury in Los Angeles indicted two men on conspiracy and hate crime offenses over attacks on five victims at a family-owned Turkish restaurant while shouting anti-Turkish slurs, and threatening to kill them, the US Justice Department said.

"The indictment was unsealed today following the arrest Harutyun Harry Chalikyan," the Justice Department said in a press release on Tuesday. "The second defendant in the case, William Stepanyan... is currently in state custody."

The defendants, both Americans of Armenian descent are charged with one count of conspiracy and five hate crimes, the release said.

Stepanyan sent a text message on November 4, 2020, saying that he planned to go "hunting for [T]urks," the release said.

Later that day, Stepanyan met with Chalikyan and other Armenian-Americans to protest what they considered to be Turkish aggression against Armenians, the release said.

During the attack, multiple victims were injured, including one individual who lost feeling in their legs and collapsed multiple times due to the injury, the release added.

After the victims escaped, Stepanyan and Chalikyan proceeded to vandalize the restaurant, causing more than \$20,000 in damages and forcing the facility to close temporarily, according to the release.

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Idaho Governor Signs Bill Into Law Banning Abortion After Baby's First Heartbeat Detected

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Idaho Governor Brad Little signed the Fetal Heartbeat Bill into law that prohibits abortion after a baby's heartbeat has been detected, the Governor's office said in a release.

"Governor Brad Little signed House Bill 366 into law today, the bill commonly known as the Fetal Heartbeat Bill," the release said on Tuesday. "The bill bans abortions after a baby's heartbeat is detected, around five or six weeks after conception."

The bill made exceptions for abortions in cases of medical emergencies and pregnancies that are the result of rape or incest, the release said.

The bill considers a heartbeat as a more reliable indicator of life than the concept that life begins when a baby is potentially able to live outside the mother's womb.

A medical professional who conducts an abortion after a heartbeat is detected will face sentence of up to 5 years in jail for a felony of criminal abortion, according to the new law.

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Biden Picks Texas Sheriff to Head Immigration and Customs Enforcement

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has picked Texas sheriff Ed Gonzalez to be the next Director of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the White House said

Gonzalez won reelection in 2020 for a second term as sheriff of Harris County, the largest sheriff's office in Texas, and the third-largest in the United States.

A native of Houston, Gonzalez began his law enforcement career as a civilian employee in the city's police department, became a police officer and sergeant who served on an elite hostage negotiation team and was a backup homicide investigations. He was also Vice Mayor Pro-Tem and Mayor Pro-Tem on the Houston City Council between 2010 and 2012.

Gonzalez's nomination was announced as US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas unveiled earlier on Tuesday new limits of enforcement, including arrests, that could be applied on immigrants in the vicinity of courthouses, so that those seeking justice on matters of immigration could be protected.

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Taliban Face Sanctions, Isolation if They Obstruct Afghan Peace Deal - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The Taliban movement will face sanctions and isolation from the United States and its allies if it obstructs efforts to reach a peace deal in Afghanistan, US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad said during a congressional hearing.

"But if they obstruct a negotiated settlement and instead pursue a military takeover, they will be opposed not only by the United States but by our allies, partners, and the region. They will face isolation, regional opposition, sanctions, and international opprobrium," Khalilzad told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday.

Countries in the region have a shared interest in ensuring a stable Afghanistan and partners like Pakistan must do more to keep the Taliban from pursuing a military takeover of the country, Khalilzad said.

Pakistani leaders understand their country will face grave consequences if neighboring Afghanistan should erupt into a civil war between the Taliban and Afghan government, Khalilzad added.

The Special Envoy mentioned repeatedly that he does not believe the government of Afghanistan will collapse after the United States and NATO withdraw ground forces by May 1. Moreover, the United States is developing contingency plans to prepare for a potential refugee crisis in Afghanistan should the country descend into a civil war after US and NATO forces leave, Khalilzad said, adding that the current plans have not been finalized yet.

The deployment of UN peacekeepers in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of American forces is a possibility, but it hasn't come up yet, Khalilzad told the Senate panel.

The US envoy added that the United States asked the United Nations to play a more active role in "promoting, facilitating" the peace process in Afghanistan.

The Afghan peace agreement reached by the United States and the opposition Taliban movement was the best possible deal under the given circumstances, Khalilzad said.

Khalilzad said the United States would be caught in a war with the Taliban if US leaders decided to remain in Afghanistan for more than a year.

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Ex-Attorney for 3 Puerto Rico Cities Gets 10-Year Sentence for Bribery - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - A former attorney who represented three municipalities in the US territory of Puerto Rico received a decade-long prison sentence following his conviction on four counts of bribery, the Justice Department said.

"According to evidence introduced at trial, at various times between July 2009 and June 2012, [Alejandro] Carrasco was an attorney providing legal services to the Puerto Rican Municipalities of Barceloneta, Rio Grande, and Juncos," the Justice Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

During that time, Carrasco accepted bribes disguised as legal fees to help an unnamed contractor obtain business from the cities, the release said.

In total, Carrasco accepted more than \$180,000 in bribes in exchange for helping the contractor win more than \$2.3 million in municipal contracts, the release said.

The trial also showed Carrasco urged the contractor to bribe officials in other cities, the release added.

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US, Israel Agree to Establish Working Group to Counter Iran Drones, Missiles - White House

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The US and Israeli national security advisors met on Tuesday to discuss bilateral relations between the two countries, during which time they agreed to form a working group to help address the threat of Iranian drone and missile attacks, according to the White House.

"The United States and Israel agreed to establish an inter-agency working group to focus particular attention on the growing threat of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and Precision Guided Missiles produced by Iran and provided to its proxies in the Middle East Region," the White House said.

The announcement comes in the wake of rocket attacks launched from Gaza into Israel.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- * US President Joe Biden on Tuesday refused to say whether he has any preconditions to hold a meeting with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

- * The Biden administration intends to hold direct conversations with Russian officials regarding their response to recent US sanctions, a senior administration official said.

- * The United State expects relations with Russia to remain difficult, however, it hopes for stable and predictable ties, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

- * Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told Sputnik in an interview he has confirmed his attendance at an upcoming Arctic Council ministerial meeting, adding that he would be ready to hold talks with his US counterpart Antony Blinken at the event, should the latter express interest.

- * Lavrov used the word "schizophrenia" to describe some statements made by representatives of the White House on US sanctions imposed on Russia and said bilateral relations would have been normalized if it were up to Moscow.

US POLICY ON AFGHANISTAN

* The Taliban movement will face sanctions and isolation from the United States and its allies if it obstructs efforts to reach a peace deal in Afghanistan, US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad said during a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

* The United States is developing plans to address a potential refugee crisis in Afghanistan should the country descend into a civil war after US and NATO forces leave, Khalilzad said.

* The US government is advising all Americans wishing to leave Afghanistan to do so as soon as possible due to a high level of violence in the country, the State Department said in a travel advisory.

* US government employees in the embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan have been ordered to depart the country due to concerning levels of violence as the United States prepares to withdraw ground forces, the State Department said in a travel advisory.

US NAVY SHIPS ENTER BLACK SEA

* US Coast Guard patrol ship Hamilton entered the Black Sea on Tuesday and is being tracked by the Black Sea Fleet forces, the Russian Defense Ministry's National Defense Control Center (NDCC) told reporters.

* The US coastal patrol cutter Hamilton has entered the Black Sea, the Sixth Fleet said.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

* Russian vaccine Sputnik V will also be effective against the Indian mutation of the coronavirus, Alexander Gintsburg, director of the Gamaleya Research Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology of the Russian Health Ministry, told Sputnik.

* The World Health Organization (WHO) will provide 4,000 oxygen concentrators to India which is experiencing a surge in COVID-19 cases and related deaths, a spokesperson of the global health body told Sputnik.

DIPLOMATIC DISPUTES

* The ambassadors of the Baltic countries and Slovakia will be summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday, the ministry told reporters.

* Germany supports the Czech Republic's decision to expel Russian diplomats and stands ready to assist in maintaining the work of the Czech embassy in Moscow, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Kiev will react symmetrically if Russia continues its "provocations" against Ukrainian diplomats working in Russia, Ukrainian Foreign Ministry State Secretary Oleksandr Bankov said on Tuesday.

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Minsk agreements should not be terminated but some points need to be updated.

* The Russian Embassy in Kiev has received a note from the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry on the expulsion of the Russian consul in Odesa, the embassy's spokesperson told Sputnik.

* The Kremlin believes the only right step for Kiev is to engage in direct negotiations with the self-proclaimed people's republics of Donetsk (DPR) and Luhansk (LPR), and implement the Minsk agreements, spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

RUSSIA TAKES CYBER PROTECTION MEASURES

- * Russia has implemented necessary measures to protect itself following reports that the United States plans to stage cyberattacks, National Computer Incident Response and Coordination Center Deputy Director Nikolay Murashov said on Tuesday.
- * Timely measures taken against cyberattacks last year prevented Russia's public administration system and economy from being intruded, Murashov said.
- * The number of DDoS attacks on Russian state agencies has increased during unauthorized protests in support of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, Murashov said.

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US Energy Department Allocates \$8.25Bln as 'Down Payment' On Planned Upgrade of Power Grid

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – The US earmarked a loan package of \$8.25 billion to upgrade power transmission systems in the western United States, with most of the financing targeting Native American communities, the Energy Department said on Tuesday.

"This is a down payment on our efforts to modernize our transmission nationwide," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a press release announcing the initiative. "These investments will make our power system more resilient against threats and more reliable as we increase our clean energy capacity, creating thousands of jobs in the process."

Up to \$5 billion in loan guarantees will support projects by federally recognized Native American tribes and Alaska Native Corporations, including connections to offshore wind farms and to facilities along rail and highway routes, the release said.

The remaining \$3.25 billion will subsidize a federal financing program targeting grid upgrades in the Western Area Power Administration (WAPA), which covers much of the US west of the Mississippi River, the release added.

The package is part of a larger effort by the Biden administration to upgrade the nation's entire power grid, with added resilience against cyber threats, natural disasters and physical threats, according to the release.

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US Crafting Contingency Plans for Possible Afghan Refugee Crisis After Pullout - Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is developing plans to address a potential refugee crisis in Afghanistan should the country descend into a civil war after US and NATO forces leave, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad said in a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

"We are working ourselves to develop humanitarian plans for possible increase in number of Afghan refugees," Khalilzad told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Khalilzad said the current plans have not been finalized yet.

The Special Envoy mentioned said repeatedly that he does not believe the government of Afghanistan will collapse after the United States and NATO withdraw ground forces by May 1.

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US Military Crews Fire Warning Shots After 3 Iranian IRGC Boats Come in Close Range - Navy

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US military crews fired warning shots in the Persian Gulf after three Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) vessels came within close proximity of their ships, the Navy said on Thursday.

"The US crews issued multiple warnings via bridge-to-bridge radio and loud-hailer devices, but the IRGCN vessels continued their close range maneuvers. The crew of Firebolt then fired warning shots, and the IRGCN vessels moved away to a safe distance from the US vessels," the Navy said in a statement.

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Biden Nominates Army Reserve Veteran for US Air Force Secretary

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has picked US army reserve veteran Frank Kendall to be Secretary of the Air Force, the White House announced on Tuesday.

"Mr. Kendall has over 45 years of experience in engineering, management, defense acquisition, and national security affairs," a White House statement said of the candidate, who graduated from the Army War College before serving the Army Reserves as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Among the many positions Kendall had held over the past four decades were as senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, senior advisor to the Center for Strategic and International Studies and as a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the White House said.

Kendall was also undersecretary of defense and principal deputy undersecretary for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics between 2010 and 2012, it said.

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N. Carolina Governor Calls for Special Prosecutor to Probe Police Shooting of Andrew Brown

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper called for a special prosecutor to handle all matters related to the police shooting of Andrew Brown, the Governor's office said in a statement on Tuesday.

"In the interest of justice and confidence in the judicial system, I believe a special prosecutor should handle all matters regarding the shooting in Pasquotank County. This would help assure the community and Mr. Brown's family that a decision on pursuing criminal charges is conducted without bias," Governor Cooper said in the statement.

Police shot and killed Brown, a black man from Elizabeth City, while executing a search warrant. An autopsy revealed that he was shot five times after allegedly trying to drive away from the police.

Law enforcement officials have said that Brown was a convicted felon with a history of resisting arrest, and as such, considered the execution of the warrant a high-risk, dangerous situation. Brown's legal team, in contrast, has described the shooting as an execution.

The Mayor of Elizabeth City, Bettie Parker, declared a state of emergency on Monday in anticipation of civil unrest following the release of body camera footage of the shooting. The FBI announced on Tuesday that it would be opening a federal civil rights investigation into the shooting.

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Canada Records First Death Following AstraZeneca Shot in Quebec – Premier
TORONTO, April 27 (Sputnik) – The Canadian province of Quebec has recorded the country's first death following immunization with the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, Premier Francois Legault said on Tuesday.

"We just had our first patient who has died of cerebral thrombosis following vaccination from AstraZeneca," Legault told reporters. "To date, it is the first death that has been declared in Canada."

The victim, a 54-year-old woman, received medical treatment but succumbed to the deadly side effect, the premier said.

Legault and the province's chief medical officer, Horacio Arruda, said that the vaccination with the AstraZeneca vaccine is a calculated risk and stressed that the benefits of the UK drugmaker's shot continue to outweigh the risks. The province will not be changing its immunization guidelines, despite the vaccine-induced fatality, Arruda said.

Health Canada had temporarily paused inoculation for Canadians under the age of 55 with the AstraZeneca vaccine following a recommendation from Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations. The immunization drive has since resumed among those over 40 eligible to receive it.

Earlier this month, a Canadian safety review of AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine concluded that blood clotting events are possibly linked to it. As a result of the review, Canadian health officials introduced a warning section indicating the "stronger link" between the blood clotting events and the AstraZeneca vaccine on the safety label.

The controversy surrounding the UK drugmaker's vaccine has undermined confidence in the shot, with polling numbers unveiled on Monday showing that only 52 percent of Canadians are comfortable receiving the AstraZeneca inoculation and 40 percent of this group would reject it if offered.

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US Govt. Targets Transnational Migrant Smuggler Networks - Homeland Security Secretary

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The US government has launched a new operation codenamed Sentinel to target transnational criminal organizations specializing in smuggling illegal immigrants into the United States, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas today announced a new counter-network targeting operation focused on transnational criminal organizations affiliated with the smuggling of migrants, the release said.

Operation Sentinel is a collaborative effort by several agencies, including Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Citizenship and Immigration Services as well as the State Department, FBI and Drug Enforcement Administration, the release said.

"Transnational criminal organizations put profit over human life, with devastating consequences. With the help of our federal and foreign partners, we aim to cut off access to that profit by denying these criminals the ability to engage in travel, trade, and finance in the United States," Mayorkas said.

Operation Sentinel will target all personnel and identifiable resources that transnational criminal organizations require to operate and will map the organizations' networks; target their members, associates, and assets; and employ a series of targeted actions and sanctions against them, according to the release.

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UN Peacekeepers in Afghanistan Possibility, But Hasn't 'Come Up' Yet - US Envoy Khalilzad

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The deployment of UN peacekeepers in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of American forces is a possibility, but it hasn't come up yet, US Special Representative for Afghanistan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad told a Senate panel on Tuesday. "That's a possibility that they might... but as of now this issue has not come up," Khalilzad replied to a question if the Afghan authorities may request the deployment of an international peacekeeping force.

Speaking to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he added that the US asked the UN to play a more active role in "promoting, facilitating" the peace process in Afghanistan.

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Pfizer Could Have First Oral Drug for COVID-19 By End of Year - CEO Bourla

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Pfizer's experimental oral drug to treat COVID-19 at the first sign of illness could be available before the end of the year, Chief Executive Albert Bourla told CNBC on Tuesday.

The drug is part of a class of medicines called protease inhibitors and works by inhibiting an enzyme that the virus needs to replicate in human cells, Bourla told the network in an interview. If clinical trials go well and the Food and Drug Administration approves it, the drug could be distributed across the United States by the end of the year, he added.

Pfizer, which developed with German drugmaker BioNTech the first COVID-19 vaccine approved by US health authorities last year, began in March this year an early stage clinical trial that deployed protease inhibitors used for treating viral pathogens such as HIV and hepatitis C, Bourla said.

CNBC quoted health experts as saying the oral drug could be a game changer because people newly infected with the virus could use it outside of hospitals. Researchers hope the new medication will keep the disease from progressing and prevent hospital trips.

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US Iran Envoy Malley Traveling to Vienna For Additional JCPOA Talks - White House

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – US special envoy Rob Malley is traveling to take part in an additional round of talk on the Iran nuclear deal, the White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said at a briefing on Tuesday.

"Rob Malley I believe is either on his way to the region or there now to take part in an additional round of negotiations. We have felt that even though they are indirect, obviously a diplomatic process, diplomatic discussions are the right approach, and we have been encouraged by the fact that they've been continuing," Psaki said.

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US Agreement With Taliban Best Possible Deal Under Given Circumstances - Special Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The Afghan peace agreement reached by the United States and the opposition Taliban movement was the best possible deal under the given circumstances, US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad said in a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

"Under the circumstances, with the desire of the United States to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the agreement that we struck with the Taliban was the best possible," Khalilzad said.

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Biden Admin to Hold Talks With Russia on US Sanctions, Moscow's Retaliation - Sr. Official

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The Biden Administration intends to hold direct conversations with Russian officials regarding their response to recent US sanctions, a senior administration official said on Tuesday.

"We will be having a very direct conversation with Russian counterparts in the coming days, and already have done so," the senior administration official said.

The official noted that the US does not intend to escalate tensions with Russia, but rather aims to clarify their respective positions.

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US Lawyers Admit to Paying Bribes For Migrant Detainee Lists to Target as Future Clients

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – Two lawyers in the state of Texas pleaded guilty to charges based on bribing officials at a migrant detention center for detainee lists and using the lists to solicit future clients, the Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"Roel Alaniz admitted he paid immigration detention employees for 'alien detainee roster lists.' The lists were provided to him or his sister - Cynthia Alanis - who is also an attorney, in the Rio Grande Valley [of Texas]," Justice said in a press release.

The detainee lists contained names, dates of birth, country of origin and alien identification numbers. The attorneys would visit those listed, or instruct others to do so, in order to solicit them as clients in future immigration proceedings," the release said.

Roel Alaniz pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery and bribery of a public official. His sister pleaded guilty to making a false statement in a bribery investigation, the release added. In addition, two employees of Texas' Willacy County Regional Detention Center, who sold the lists to Roel Alaniz, pleaded guilty to charges of conspiracy and bribery of a public official, according to the release.

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Pakistan Understands 'Grave Consequences' of Civil War Erupting in Afghanistan - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Pakistani leaders understand their country will face serious consequences if neighboring Afghanistan should erupt into a civil war between the Taliban and Afghan government, US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad said in a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

"Pakistan's leaders have emphasized publicly and to US officials that they do not support a military takeover by the Taliban. I believe they understand that not only Afghanistan, but their country too will face grave consequences in the event of a return to a wider civil war," Khalilzad said during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Afghanistan.

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Taliban to Face Sanctions, Isolation if They Obstruct Afghan Peace Deal - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The Taliban movement will face sanctions and isolation from the United States and its allies if it obstructs efforts to reach a peace deal in Afghanistan, US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad said in a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

"But if they obstruct a negotiated settlement and instead pursue a military takeover, they will be opposed not only by the United States but by our allies, partners, and the region. They will face isolation, regional opposition, sanctions, and international opprobrium," Khalilzad said during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

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US to Limit Immigration Enforcement Actions Near Courthouses - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US immigration, customs and border authorities are putting limits to the civil enforcement, including arrests, that can be carried out in and around courthouses to prevent the harassment of individuals seeking justice on matters of immigration, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said Tuesday.

"Ensuring that individuals have access to the courts advances the fair administration of justice, promotes safety for crime victims, and helps to guarantee equal protection under the law," Mayorkas said in a statement. "The expansion of civil immigration arrests at courthouses during the prior administration had a chilling effect on individuals' willingness to come to court or work cooperatively with law enforcement. Today's guidance is the latest step in our efforts to focus our civil immigration enforcement resources on threats to homeland security and public safety." He said the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement division and the Customs and Border Protection unit have been informed of the new limits.

"The interim guidance is intended to balance the importance of preserving access to courts in the fair administration of justice with legitimate civil immigration enforcement interests,"

Mayorkas said. "Additional guidance will be forthcoming following the release of updated immigration enforcement priorities."

Under the new guidance, a civil immigration enforcement action may be taken in or near a courthouse only in certain limited instances, including matters that involved national security; imminent risk of death, violence, or physical harm to any person; hot pursuit of an individual posing a threat to public safety; and imminent risk of destruction of evidence material to a criminal case.

Trump came to office in 2017, vowing to deport as many as 3 million unauthorized immigrants with criminal records living in the United States. Immigration arrests took on a higher profile under him due to highly-visible worksite enforcement operations and increased detention in residential neighborhoods and sensitive locations such as courthouses and schools, among others.

Biden, who took office in January, has made immigration a priority too, signing 94 related executive actions in his first 100 days, more than half of them to undo Trump's orders on immigration.

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Biden Say Next Week Will Reveal Plan to Get Life in US Closer to Normal by July 4

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he will roll out next week his administration's plan to get life in the United States closer to normal amid the novel coronavirus pandemic by Independence Day.

"Next week, I'll be laying out the path ahead to continue our fight against COVID-19 to get us to July 4, that's our target date to get life in America closer to normal," Biden said during a press conference.

Biden noted that two-thirds of US seniors are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus and said the number of cases and deaths have dramatically decreased.

The US president said some 215 million doses of coronavirus vaccines have been administered in the United States since January 20 when he assumed office.

However, Biden said masks should still be worn during crowded outdoor events as well as indoors.

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Biden Refuses to Say Whether He Has Preconditions for Holding Summit With Putin

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Tuesday refused to say whether he has preconditions for holding a meeting with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

"I'll discuss that all another day," Biden said.

The US president offered Putin to meet during summer in a yet to be determined European country.

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US to Release 60Mln AstraZeneca Doses to Other Countries as Supply Increases - WH Advisor

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States will release 60 million AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine doses to other countries as the supply increases, Biden administration COVID-19 response team senior adviser Andrew Slavitt said on Monday.

"US to release 60 million AstraZeneca doses to other countries as they become available," Slavitt said in a statement via Twitter.

Earlier on Tuesday, Slavitt confirmed that the Biden administration is looking at the options to share about 60 million AstraZeneca vaccines with other countries over the next two months with 10 million doses to be distributed globally right after the Food and Drug Administration grants its authorization and 50 million more doses in the coming months.

Slavitt also said that the Biden administration is currently in the process of locating raw materials necessary to manufacture more vaccines in India.

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US to Limit Immigration Enforcement Actions Near Courthouses - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US immigration, customs and border authorities are putting limits to the civil enforcement, including arrests, that can be carried out in and around courthouses to prevent the harassment of individuals seeking justice on matters of immigration, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas said Tuesday.

"Ensuring that individuals have access to the courts advances the fair administration of justice, promotes safety for crime victims, and helps to guarantee equal protection under the law," Mayorkas said in a statement. "The expansion of civil immigration arrests at courthouses during the prior administration had a chilling effect on individuals' willingness to come to court or work cooperatively with law enforcement. Today's guidance is the latest step in our efforts to focus our civil immigration enforcement resources on threats to homeland security and public safety."

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US Expects Relation With Russia to Remain Challenged, Aims for Stable Ties - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United State expects relations with Russia to remain difficult, however, it hopes for stable and predictable ties, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"We expect this relationship to remain a challenge and it is one we are prepared for," the spokesperson said. "Our goal is to have a relationship with Russia that is predictable and stable."

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FBI Opens Civil Rights Probe Into Police Shooting Death of Andrew Brown - Statement
WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The FBI said on Tuesday that it has opened a civil rights investigation into the police shooting death of Andrew Brown in the state of North Carolina last week.

"The FBI Charlotte Field Office has opened a federal civil rights investigation into the police involved shooting death of Andrew Brown, Jr," the FBI said in a statement.

Brown, a black man residing in Elizabeth City, was shot dead by police last week after allegedly driving away from police who were executing a search warrant at his residence.

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US Navy Confirms Coast Guard Cutter Entered Black Sea - Sixth Fleet

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US coastal patrol cutter Hamilton has entered the Black Sea, the Sixth Fleet said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The Legend-class national security cutter USCGC Hamilton (WMSL 753) transited into the Black Sea in support of NATO Allies and partners, April 27, 2021," the statement said.

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Fully Vaccinated Americans Can Now Go Outdoors Unmasked - US Health Agency

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Fully vaccinated Americans can now engage in outdoor and small indoor gatherings without wearing a mask, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said in a briefing on Tuesday.

"If you are fully vaccinated and want to attend a small outdoor gathering with people who are vaccinated and unvaccinated or dining at an outdoor restaurant with friends from multiple households, the science shows, if you're vaccinated, you can do so safely unmasked," Walensky said. "Generally, for vaccinated people, outdoor activities without a mask are safe."

However, Walensky also said the CDC continues to recommend that people use masks in crowded outdoor settings and venues where there is decreased ability to maintain physical distance.

People who are masked and fully vaccinated can safely attend indoor worship services, go to an indoor dining venue, and even participate in an indoor exercise class, Walensky added.

At the same time, Walensky said the CDC recommendations have not changed for unvaccinated people.

The updated CDC guidelines also provided that fully vaccinated workers are no longer required to be restricted from work after being exposed as long as they do not have any symptoms while fully vaccinated people in general may be exempted from routine screening testing.

More than 230 million Americans have been vaccinated with at least one dose of the available vaccines and nearly 88 million people have been fully vaccinated, according to the data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

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US Orders Departure of Government Employees from Embassy in Afghanistan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US government employees in the embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan have been ordered to depart the country due to concerning levels of violence as the United States prepares to withdraw ground forces, the State Department said in a travel advisory on Tuesday.

"On April 27, 2021, the Department ordered the departure from US Embassy Kabul of US government employees whose functions can be performed elsewhere," the advisory said. The Taliban had earlier cast a shadow on the upcoming US drawdown, saying that the non-aggression clause in the 2020 US-Taliban peace deal would expire on the May 1, 2021 withdrawal deadline.

The US government has also advised all Americans wishing to leave Afghanistan to leave as soon as possible.

US and NATO ground forces are expected to be out of Afghanistan by September 11. After the withdrawal, the Biden administration has said it intends to focus its resources in the Indo-Pacific region amid Chinese activity the administration finds it threatens United States' interests in the region.

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RPT - Fully Vaccinated Americans Can Now Go Outdoors Unmasked - US Health Agency

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US Urges Americans Wishing to Depart Afghanistan to Leave Immediately - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The US government is advising all Americans wishing to leave Afghanistan to leave as soon as possible due to a high level of violence in the country, the State Department said in a travel advisory on Tuesday.

"US citizens wishing to depart Afghanistan should leave as soon as possible on available commercial flights," the advisory said.

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US Military to Deploy Tactical Ballistic Missiles to Afghanistan to Aid Withdrawal

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – The US military is set to deploy tactical ballistic missiles to Afghanistan to support the drawdown of its troops from the country, CENTCOM said on Tuesday.

"High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems moving from Kuwait to #Afghanistan to support troop exit," CENTCOM said on Twitter.

The withdrawal of the 2,500 US troops from Afghanistan is set to require an initial increase in the number of troops deployed as infrastructure built over 20 years of war will require dismantling and a coordinated extraction.

Earlier this month, US President Joe Biden announced plans to fully withdraw US troops from the nation by September 11 of this year, despite the 2020 US-Taliban peace deal setting May 1, 2021 as the deadline for withdrawal. The Taliban had said that the non-aggression clause against US forces will become null on the May 1 deadline.

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Fully Vaccinated Americans Can Now Go Outdoors Unmasked - US Health Agency

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has updated its face mask guidelines with respect to fully vaccinated Americans and can engage in outdoor activities and small indoor gatherings without wearing a mask, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said in a briefing on Tuesday.

"If you are fully vaccinated and want to attend a small outdoor gathering with people who are vaccinated and unvaccinated or dining at an outdoor restaurant with friends from multiple households, the science shows, if you're vaccinated, you can do so safely unmasked," Walensky said. "Generally, for vaccinated people, outdoor activities without a mask are safe." However, Walensky also said the CDC continues to recommend people use masks in crowded outdoor settings and venues where there is decreased ability to maintain physical distance.

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Finland's Niinisto, US Vice President Harris Discuss Countering Russia in Euro-Atlantic

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris and Finland's President Sauli Niinisto have addressed the necessity to uphold sustained unity to counter Russia in the Euro-Atlantic area, a White House readout of a phone talk between the two showed on Tuesday.

"The Vice President thanked President Niinisto for Finland's robust defense partnership with the United States and its climate leadership, especially in the Arctic," the readout said. "They discussed the need for... sustained unity and vigilance to counter the destabilizing actions Russia continues to carry out across the Euro-Atlantic area."

The readout also showed the two also agreed on the importance of ongoing collaboration on various matters including migration from Central America, global health, and security challenges. Earlier this month, the Finnish president's office told Sputnik that it had invited the US and Russian presidents to potentially meet in the country after Joe Biden proposed to Vladimir Putin a meeting in a third country in a phone call.

Helsinki has already hosted a number of high-level meetings, including between the leaders of the USSR and the United States and, more recently, between Putin and then-US President Donald Trump in 2018.

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Autopsy Shows US Police Shot Andrew Brown 5 Times, Including in Back of Head - Attorneys

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Andrew Brown Jr. was shot five times, including in the back of the head, by police officers last week during an attempted arrest at his home in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, family attorney Wayne Kendall said on Tuesday.

"What our preliminary autopsy report shows is there were five penetrating bullet wounds to the body of Andrew Brown Jr.," Kendall said during a press conference.

Kendall said the initial gunshots came through the front windshield of Brown's car and he was shot in the back of the head as he was trying to evade the police officers.

Brown was shot dead by police last week after allegedly driving away from police who were executing a search warrant at his residence in Elizabeth City.

Brown's family and attorneys were shown a 20-second video clip of a police officer's body camera footage showing his death that they characterized as execution. The family's attorneys said the video may become public on Wednesday if a local judge permits release of the footage. On Monday, Mayor Bettie Parker declared a state of emergency in Elizabeth City in anticipation of potential civil unrest due to the soon-to-be-released police body camera footage of the fatal officer-involved shooting in Brown's death.

The police said Brown was a convicted felon with a history of resisting arrest and they deemed the execution of the warrant to constitute a high-risk, dangerous situation.

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US Eases Travel For Individuals From China, Iran, Brazil, South Africa - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The US has expanded its National Interest Exceptions, allowing students and individuals who provide "critical infrastructure support" in Brazil, China, Iran, and South Africa to apply for entry in spite of COVID-19 travel restrictions, the State Department announced on Tuesday.

"Students seeking to commence studies in the fall, certain academics, journalists, and individuals who provide critical infrastructure support in countries affected by a geographic COVID-19 restriction may now qualify for a National Interest Exception," a press release said. The State Department added that the move includes qualified applicants "who have been present in Brazil, China, Iran, or South Africa."

The measure previously applied to applicants from the Schengen area and the United Kingdom.

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Blinken, Nigerian President Discuss Security Challenges, COVID-19 Response - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during held a virtual meeting with Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari and Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama during which he addressed security matters and the fight against the coronavirus pandemic, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Tuesday. "They discussed the global economic recovery, Nigeria's security challenges and regional security issues, the effort against COVID-19, and the effects of climate change in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin," Price said. "The Secretary and the President reaffirmed the strong partnership between the United States and Nigeria, founded upon shared democratic ideals and a spirit of transparency and cooperation."

Buhari said the United States should consider relocating its Africa Command (AFRICOM) headquarters from Germany to Africa in order to fight terrorism in the region more effectively. In addition, Buhari underscored the importance of international cooperation and partnerships in combating terrorism in Africa.

Nigeria will continue fighting against terrorism and considers international support and strategic cooperation in resolving this challenge to be of particular importance, he said.

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US Charges Ex-White House Adviser With Stealing \$218,005 From Schools - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Former White House Aide Seth Andrew faces fraud charges alleging he stole more than \$200,000 from a network of public charter schools that he founded - cash that enabled him to obtain a favorable rate on a mortgage for a home purchased in New York City, the US Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"As alleged, Seth Andrew abused his position as a founder of a charter school network to steal from the very same schools he helped create. Andrew is not only alleged to have stolen the schools' money but also to have used the stolen funds to obtain a savings on a mortgage for a multimillion-dollar Manhattan apartment," US Attorney Audrey Strauss said in a press release announcing the defendant's arrest.

The \$218,005 reported stolen was used in an elaborate scheme involving multiple escrow accounts of School Network-1, which he founded, to inflate the balance in a savings account needed to for Andrew to qualify for a reduced mortgage rate, the release said.

Andrew subsequently purchased a residential property in New York City for \$2,368,000, the release said.

In 2013, Andrew accepted a job in the US Department of Education and later as a senior adviser in the White House Office of Educational Technology. While employed by the US government until November 2016, ANDREW continued receiving pay from School Network-1, the release added.

Andrew, faces charges of wire fraud, money laundering and for making a false statement to a bank, according to the release.

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US Consumer Confidence Hits 14-Month High as Jobs, Inflation Figures Improve - CC Index

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US consumer confidence hit a 14-month high in April as the outlook on the economy strengthened from what appeared to be a steadily improving jobs market and relief payments amid the coronavirus pandemic, the Conference Board's Consumer Confidence Index showed.

"Consumer confidence has rebounded sharply over the last two months and is now at its highest level since February 2020," Lynn Franco, senior director of economic indicators at the Conference Board, said in a statement. "Consumers' assessment of current conditions improved significantly in April, suggesting the economic recovery strengthened further in early Q2."

The Conference Board's Consumer Confidence Index stood at 121.7 at its latest measurement for April, up from 109.7 in March. Economists polled by US media had expected the index to only go up to just 113.

"We're still not back to pre-pandemic levels but this is a big improvement," economist Adam Button said in a comment on ForexLive.

Conference Board director Franco said consumers' optimism about the short-term economic outlook improved in April as the job market showed steady signs of recovery while households had additional cash in hand from stimulus checks of \$1,400 a person sent out by the Biden administration as relief for the COVID-19.

"Short-term inflation expectations held steady in April, but remain elevated," she added.

The number of US citizens filing for unemployment benefits has declined sharply in the past two weeks, with a near 7 percent drop last week after a 25 percent reduction the week prior.

A rash of US economic data, from consumer spending to inflation, homebuilding and house prices, have also exceeded forecasts lately, fueling hopes for faster-than-expected recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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US Energy Dept Develops 'Shoe Scanner' For Airports to Ease Passenger Screenings

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – US airline passengers may soon avoid the cumbersome ritual of removing their shoes before boarding flights, due to technology developed by an Energy Department lab and licensed to a commercial manufacturer, the department said on Tuesday. “The Shoe Scanner uses the HD-AIT [High Definition - Advanced Imaging Technology] ... to penetrate footwear without the passenger having to remove shoes for screeners to detect concealed objects. Persons screened will step on a low-profile, imaging platform for approximately two seconds while low-power electromagnetic energy is used to generate a composite image of the shoe to determine whether a threat is present,” an Energy Department press release said.

The shoe scanner and HD-AIT system, which also promises to upgrade overall airport screening procedures, were developed by the Energy Department's Northwest National Laboratory. Both technologies were recently licensed to Liberty Defense Holdings for commercial development, the release said.

The HD-AIT system itself offers the promise that people could be screened at airports and large public events without having to remove outer garments such as jackets and sweaters, the release added.

The US began searching airline passengers' shoes following the unsuccessful suicide bombing attempt by terrorist Richard Reid, who failed to ignite a bomb built into his shoe during a December 2001 flight from Paris to the state of Florida.

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Nigeria's President Urges US to Relocate AFRICOM Headquarters to Africa

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – The United States should consider relocating its Africa Command (AFRICOM) headquarters from Germany to Africa to better fight against terrorism in the region, Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari said on Tuesday.

“Considering the growing security challenges in West and Central Africa... underscores the need for the United States to consider relocating AFRICOM headquarters from Stuttgart in Germany to Africa and near the theatre of operations,” Buhari said during a virtual meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Buhari has underscored the importance of international partnership in combating terrorism in Africa.

“All nations should cooperate to overcome these challenges,” he said, adding that potential consequences will affect the whole world.

Nigeria will continue fighting against terrorism, he promised, noting the importance of international support and strategic cooperation in resolving this challenge.

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US to Raise Hourly Federal Contractors' Minimum Wage to \$15 - White House

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden issued an executive order to raise the hourly minimum wage of federal contract workers to \$15 by 2022, the White House announced in a release on Tuesday.

"Today, President Biden is issuing an executive order requiring federal contractors to pay a \$15 minimum wage to hundreds of thousands of workers who are working on federal contracts," the release said.

The White House stressed that such workers are vital for the government's functioning and include cleaning professionals, maintenance workers, nursing assistants, catering service workers, among others.

"Starting January 30, 2022, all agencies will need to incorporate a \$15 minimum wage in new contract solicitations, and by March 30, 2022, all agencies will need to implement the minimum wage into new contracts," the release noted. "Agencies must also implement the higher wage into existing contracts when the parties exercise their option to extend such contracts, which often occurs annually."

The executive order will also continue to index the minimum wage to an inflation measure, the White House noted.

Moreover, the order will ensure a \$15 minimum wage for federal contract workers with disabilities, the release said.